

"Empathy"

I was born in England in 1953. I grew up in England. I speak the English language.

In the year 2000 I had my 47th birthday.

In all of the first 47 years of my life I had never ever heard any person in Britain speak the word "empathy" or use the word "empathy" in written form. "Empathy" was not a word in English usage. It was a word I had only ever seen in science fiction.

In the 21st Century, because by then we had the internet, the word "empathy" began to be used by Americans and we were reading that word on their web pages and looking it up. They were introducing a new word as they had previously done with "brunch" or "spork" or "unincorporated community".

Of course we already had all of these things. The Americans were not giving us anything we didn't already have. They were only giving us new words to create the impression of newness.

In English the thing which the Americans were calling a "spork" was a runcible spoon, the thing they had dubbed "brunch" was, in English, called Elevenes because it occurred at around Eleven O'clock, between breakfast and dinner and the thing they called an "unincorporated community" was what we would call a suburban town or village.

Similarly the English language already had a word for being able to emotionally feel another person's situation. The word was sympathy.

They will tell you, of course, that the new word "empathy" is being introduced with a different meaning to the existing word. They will tell you that "empathy" means something like sympathy except you "really feel it".

But of course the word sympathy already means sympathy "when you really feel it". So we're being asked to accept a blatant redundancy. We already have such a redundancy in the 18th/19th Century usage of "Sensibility". We are thus fully replete in redundancies.

When I first saw the word "empathy" I remembered it as a science fiction word. As I said before I had never heard anyone in Britain use that in spoken or written form. However I had seen the word before in American science fiction magazines and in one episode of 1960s Star Trek.

So, therefore, "empathy" is a neologism which, paradoxically, has history. The history of this word is in the realms of science fiction and speculative psychology.

The timeline of the word "empathy" goes something like this:

1. From ancient times the Greek word ἐμπάθεια (or *empátheia*) existed with meanings which vary from “passion” and “physical feeling” through to specific strong feelings like prejudice, malevolence, malice, or hatred.
2. In 1858 the German philosopher Rudolf Lotze created a new German word “Einfühlung” as a translation of Greek ἐμπάθεια.
3. Throughout the 19th Century and into the early 20th Century there was a fashionable interest in mind readers, fortune tellers, hypnotism, animal magnetism, love potions, voodoo and magic influence upon another person’s feelings. There were many fake mediums and self-proclaimed magicians. Some of these performers were in show business and openly admitted to using tricks and illusions. Others pretended that the magic was real.
4. The new literary genre of science fiction was increasing in popularity alongside of gothic horror and just plain “weird stories” and by the dawn of the 20th Century there were a great many examples of stories about mind transference and telepathy. Some of these stories referred to the idea of hearing another person’s thoughts while others were more at the level of remote feeling of someone’s emotional state.
5. In 1903 Theodor Lipps adapted the term *Einfühlung* into a psychological usage.
6. In 1909 Edward B. Titchener translated *Einfühlung* into English as “empathy”.
7. By the 1960s science fiction characters who were described sometimes as “telepaths” and sometimes as “empaths” were a fairly standard trope. Star Trek had an episode called “The Empath”.
8. In the 1980s Gene Roddenberry created the “Next Generation” version of Star Trek with a crew member named Deanna Troy who was the ship’s counsellor. Deanna Troy was an empath. This storyline combined the psychologist/counsellor usage of the word “empathy” with the science fiction usage.

And then, as I say, the invented word “empathy” passed into American common usage and reached us in Britain by way of the internet.

The usual definition given by Americans when challenged about the introduction of the new word is that it replaces the existing English word because “empathy means sympathy but when you really really feel that sympathy very strongly, like as a real physical feeling, not just caring about others but really, really feeling the same things which they are feeling”.

So, if I am to believe that explanation, my sympathy for the starving people in a famine zone in Africa isn’t sufficient. The fact that I feel sympathy. The fact that it makes me cry. The fact that I care. The fact that I give money to Oxfam. None of these things apparently matter. I’m supposed to stop feeling old fashioned sympathy and start feeling the new improved “Empathy” product from the American Hegemony Corporation.

Away with my old fashioned caring and charity!

In with the new shiny “Empathy”! Instead of merely caring and trying to help I have to actually experience feelings of starvation.

Husbands who felt sympathy for their pregnant wives are not good enough! Now they must actually experience a phantom birth!

Perhaps you can really, really, really feel and experience my scepticism.